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Wellington Film Fest / '93



Steamboat Bill, Jr.

U.S.A., 1928

Director: Charles F. Reisner
Production Co.: Buster Keaton Productions
Distributor: United Artists
Presented by: Joseph M. Schenck
Story/Scenario/Titles: Carl Harbaugh
Photography: Bert Haines, J. Devereaux Jennings
(B&W)
Editor: Sherman Kell
Technical director: Fred Gabourie
Assistant director: Sandy Roth

Cast
Steamboat Bill, Jr.: Buster Keaton
Steamboat Bill: Ernest Torrence
Tom Carter, his first mate: Tom Lewis
John James King, his rival: Tom McGuire
Mary King, his daughter: Marion Byron

70 minutes/35mm

Live Cinema presented by The New Zealand Film Archive. Print restored from the original negative, courtesy of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress, Washington and the Rohauer Collection. Piano accompaniment by Tim Dodd.

One of the least known of the Buster Keaton features, yet it possibly ranks right at the top. It is certainly the most bizarrely Freudian of his adventures, dealing with a tiny son's attempt to prove himself to this huge, burly, rejecting father. Ernest Torrence is the father - a tough Mississippi-steamboat captain, who does not conceal his disgust when Junior (Keaton) arrives to join him, nattily dressed in bell-bottoms, a polka-dot tie, and a beret. When the father is in jail, Keaton tries to hand him a gigantic loaf of bread containing tools for breaking out, but the father doesn't understand what's in it and refuses the bread; Keaton mutters 'My father is ashamed of my baking.' The film features a memorable comic cyclone, and a peerless (and much imitated) sequence in which Keaton tries on hats. - *Pauline Kael*

Keaton - the most realistic and logical of comedians - has nevertheless a strong element of surreal about him. But nowhere... is there such a strong sense of nightmare as in the apocalyptic climax of *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* Keaton's sudden and utter solitude is just as in a dream. After the first shots of people and cars being blown away no other soul is to be seen in the town as it suffers destruction. When Keaton leans forward at an angle of sixty degrees from the vertical to face the wind, and tries to walk, his efforts, like walking in a dream, only take him further away from his goal... The dream continues to the end: nothing could be more dreamlike than the way the people of his life come floating along the river, on their personal ruins. - *David Robinson, Keaton*
The last part of the film is unforgettable. It eclipses for sheer panache anything he ever did. - *Kevin Brownlow, The Parade's Gone By...*